



### **Chris Danou's Capitol Report**

#### **Wisconsin Should Expand Public School Nutrition Programs**

There is so much that goes into making sure our children have a quality public education that properly prepares them for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From what is taught in the classroom, to fair funding, transit and having extracurricular activities that include sports, music, theatre and other things, we know there are truly many important parts to public education. One very critical piece of public education is the free and reduced lunch program that makes sure thousands of children across the state have access to nutritious food at school.

Last week, my Democratic colleagues and I sent a letter to the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and the Department of Health Services (DHS) asking for Wisconsin to apply to participate in a federal program through the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The agency recently announced a pilot program available to multiple states that would allow the use of Medicaid data to automatically certify students ("Direct Certification") for free and reduced price breakfast and lunches. This is essentially an expansion of Direct Certification that would allow more low-income students to become eligible for the free and reduced lunch program.

In recent years, Wisconsin has strived to utilize the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to provide free meals to all students in eligible schools. Currently, almost 60% of CEP eligible schools are enrolled in Wisconsin with about 85% of the highest-need schools being enrolled. Using this information, it becomes clear this expansion would make sense and be relatively simple to implement in Wisconsin since we are already very active identifying children who are eligible for free meals at schools through the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program.

According to data compiled by the Hunger Task Force, 96% of Wisconsin's school districts utilized Direct Certification to identify students who are eligible for free school meals during the 2013-14 school year. At the start of the 2014-15 school year, Wisconsin was ranked 11th out of 38 states nationally which were not CEP pilot program states. However, under the current Direct Certification rules, many low income children are left out because their household may not be participating in one of the federal nutrition programs that Direct Certification is setup to check.

By adding Medicaid to the list of assistance programs with which Direct Certification is able to work, there is the possibility of identifying approximately 20,000 more children whose families meet the income requirements for free meals at school. This inclusion would potentially increase the power of Direct Certification in Wisconsin by more than 6%, and could make a crucial difference to the more than 13,000 low income students at almost 80 Wisconsin schools who have not enrolled in CEP and are not quite eligible for the highest level of federal meal reimbursement.

Even if the Direct Certification expansion allowed us the opportunity to provide nutrition options to just one more child, it's something we should look into doing. The fact that it will help thousands of students shows it's necessary and is clearly the right thing to do. I hope the leaders at DPI and DHS will respond to our call for action and apply for this helpful program that will provide necessary aid to some of our most vulnerable public school students.

